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The Student-Writer

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MECHANICAL PRINCIPLES OF CREATIVE WRITING

TO THE analytical mind there is never-failing fascination in the study of physical and mechanical correspondences in psychic matters. In previous articles we have worked out many of these correspondences, discovering, for example, that there is a definite analogy between the rhythmic laws governing an artist's growth and those governing the ebb and flow of the tides, the revolving of the seasons, the systole and diastole of the heart. Again, that the process naturally followed by the mind in developing an idea or a plot is akin to that followed in rolling up a snowball. And yet again, that the relation between the boiler and the whistle on a river steamboat expresses a principle that is applicable to the handling of emotional elements in fiction. Truly, there is infinite wisdom in the old Hermetic maxim, "As above, so below." That the laws of the fulcrum, of atomic weight, and momentum have their application to literary production, if we can but find it, is a natural inference. And certainly it is easier to advance with the law than in opposition to or ignorance of it.

Take, for example, the laws of momentum. Many writers know the disappointment of returning to a half-finished composition and finding that the enthusiasm with which it was commenced has entirely disappeared. Most of us are familiar with a sense of reluctance when we sit down at the desk to begin or to resume a piece of writing. William J. Locke is quoted as saying that all of his will power is required to overcome his daily disinclination to write. Other authors of fame have acknowledged the same difficulty in driving themselves to work. What wonder, then, that lesser geniuses experience moments of torture in getting their literary compositions under way?

Most of us know also the contrasting zest in creative work that comes after the initial stage of inertia has been passed. The composition, once under way, may swing along almost of its own

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accord, thoughts tumbling forth faster than they can be put on paper. If we are writing a piece of fiction, the characters, at first so wooden, seem to have come to life and to be acting out their parts, leaving for the author only the task of telling what takes place. Interruptions, at this stage of the divine afflatus, are sternly resented. We feel that it would be a joy to go on writing forever; it is easier to continue than to stop.

These two phases of creative work are clearly illustrative of the laws of momentum. The machinery of creation is ponderous and heavily weighted. No wonder that the mind balks at the task of setting it in motion. It is impossible to start on high gear. Every ounce of mental effort is required to overcome the inertia. But, once we are well under way, how different. Only a moderate amount of power need be applied to keep the wheels merrily turning. Even bodily fatigue does not retard the progress or lessen the zest of creation. Very often, a long story is finished at a sitting, under its own momentum. If the writer happens to be a member of a family, there are black looks when he shows up for breakfast, heavy-eyed and fagged, at noon the next day, and indignant demands of "Why can't you go to bed at a decent hour?"

The truth is, he doesn't dare to stop while the wheels are running so smoothly. After a few hours' interruption, he knows from experience that it will be impossible to take up the narration with the same zest and sureness of touch that marked its development while the mood was upon him. Doubts will have crept in; the characters will have become insipid; the whole conception will seem dull and lifeless.

There is good justification for the secluded lives led by many novelists. Having few outside interests and interruptions, they are enabled to maintain the momentum of enthusiasm over an extended period—to live with their characters even when not engaged in actual writing. An interruption of several weeks or months has not improbably resulted in the failure of numerous potential masterpieces to reach the world. When the opportunity came to go on with his writing, the author found that his interest in that particular subject had vanished. In distaste, the work was altogether abandoned. Yet had it been finished under its former impetus in all likelihood it would have been entirely satisfactory.

These comments, of course, apply to creative writing of any kind, fiction writing, play writing, the development of a scientific thesis, or what not.

Few of us are in a position to withdraw from the "madding crowd" and thus develop high momentum. A large proportion of those who write or try to write are obliged to carry on the work as a relaxation from some other employment—less fascinating but

more dependable as a provider of daily rations. The writer thus situated, when he sits down for his evening session at the desk or typewriter, is likely to find difficulty in picking up the threads of the story begun in such high fever of inspiration the evening before. His sensations are suggestive of trying to start an automobile whose engine, the day before, stopped dead still and has become cold at the foot of a steep grade.

If the writer had the mental impetus that brought him thus far on the previous day, he could sail up over the ridge without even changing gears. As it is, trying to go forward from a dead standstill, he can not get up even the necessary momentum for a fair start.

Under such circumstances many a promising bit of work has been abandoned in disgust by the roadside.

But now consider. If you found yourself physically stalled in the position here described, what would you do? Why, naturally, you would *back up*. You would run as far back as might be necessary and then, by speeding forward, acquire the momentum necessary to take the ridge.

Simple isn't it? Apply this to your mental problem. Don't attempt to take up the thread of your story where you left off yesterday, especially if you ceased writing at a natural stopping place—the base of a long, steep, metaphorical hill. Go back several pages and begin to rewrite, revising and improving as you go along. Don't merely correct what is already written, but actually rewrite every word, as if for the first time, using yesterday's version as notes from which to work. You will find yourself "picking up speed" with every sentence, taking renewed interest in the story—especially as you see chances to improve the characterization or the sentence structure here and there, or to introduce new and previously unthought-of touches. When you reach the end of yesterday's narration, the break will scarcely be noticed, for the story will have begun to shape itself in your mind in advance of the words that are being written. The uphill climb that at first looked so formidable will have become an exhilarating rise.

Another result will be that your story is the stronger for the revision it has had as you went along. In developing a very short story, it is a good plan to go clear back to the beginning for each fresh start. In long compositions this is hardly practicable; the easy, natural method is to rewrite today all that was newly written yesterday; rewrite tomorrow all that was newly written today, and so on. Thus, by the time the story is finished, every part of it will have been once revised.

Sometimes the interruption is inherent rather than external. That is, a place will have been reached in the composition where

the way for further development seems blocked. The fault is not with the momentum of inspiration, but with the blocking of the road.

A good plan in such an event is to make no immediate effort to go forward. Camp for the night, as it were. The next day, when you have rested, go back some distance on the road for a fresh start, and the probability is that, before you have gone very far, you will have discovered a way over or around the obstacle. For example, suppose you are writing a piece of fiction in which the narration has been progressing favorably until you reach the point where it is necessary that a pair of lovers should elope. You find yourself floundering in the mire of a hackneyed situation. Try as you will, you can not describe the elopement so that it possesses any degree of novelty or interest.

Now, if you were taking an automobile tour and, toward evening, had reached a stretch of bad road, you would probably do the sensible thing by pitching camp. On the morrow you would go back to find a better-kept thoroughfare.

Similarly, as a common-sense author, you put aside your story at this point. Tomorrow, when you tackle that story afresh, you may easily discover the way around the unsatisfactory elopement scene. Possibly you let the girl's mother find a note pinned to her pillow advising her: "Dear Ma: Me and Jim has eloped." Thus you convey the fact to the reader without dwelling at length on an uninteresting or hackneyed stretch of detail.

Different writers will find effective various methods of "jollying themselves along," but for the majority there is rarely a difficulty of narration that can not be overcome by going back some distance in the story and securing a fresh start. Occasionally it takes several days to discover the right road, but as a rule a few hours' rest—particularly if some sleeping hours are included—will suffice.

The best of all results that come from an understanding of the law of mental momentum is that the bugbear of "getting started" is banished. Don't put the full load upon the power until the initial inertia has been overcome. That is good mechanics—also common sense for the creative writer.

W. E. H.

In the June number of THE STUDENT-WRITER begins one of the most fascinating and instructive treatments of literary technique that the magazine has thus far published, a detailed analysis of

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DRAMATIZING FICTION

PRESENT styles in fiction assuredly favor the story that appeals directly to the picturizing faculty of the reader—as distinguished from the “told” story. Following is an example of what may be termed direct visualization—narration that is dramatic in form:

Barton stood before the mirror, contemplating with fascination the revolver that he held. With a hand that trembled but slightly, he raised it to his temple. A knock sounded on the door. After a moment's hesitation, he lowered the revolver, and shoved it out of sight in a drawer. “Come in,” he said resignedly.

His friend Hallet entered briskly. “What's the matter, old chap?” he inquired, tossing his hat and gloves on the table. “You look all fagged out.”

“It's this everlasting uncertainty,” responded Barton—then, with sudden vehemence: “Why can't they tell a fellow that he's doomed and be done with it? That would be better than the suspense.”

This same subject might be handled in the “told-story” form as follows:

It was the uncertainty that sapped Barton's spirits, made him irritable, and gave him a haggard look. Often he reflected that it would be better to know that he was doomed than to endure the uncertainty. When his friend Hallet commented on his appearance, he asserted as much. He had even gone so far as to buy a revolver, thinking to take his own life.

In the first example, the ideas which we desire to present are dramatized for the benefit of the reader. Instead of explaining the character's feelings, we show him performing acts that clearly indicate these feelings. Readers may draw their own conclusions.

By all odds, this dramatic form of narrative is the more popular of the two, and deservedly so, for it requires more artistic sense and skill to suggest essential facts to the reader through action than to set them forth in bald analysis.

The dramatic method is to write: “As he entered the room, she rose smiling.” Is not this stronger than to say: “As he entered the room, she rose smiling, so great was her joy at his coming”? The added phrase merely tells the reader what was evident from her smile. Such unnecessary explanations take the life out of a passage.

An acted play usually makes a deeper impression on the mind than a story that is read. Why? Because we actually see and hear what takes place on the stage. A read story only makes us *imagine* that we see and hear. The more vivid that imagining, the more nearly does our impression of it attain the vividness of an incident actually witnessed.

The fiction writer may well learn from this fact to concentrate all his energies upon making the reader imagine that the incidents of a story are actually witnessed. If the scene described at the beginning of this article were acted out on the stage, remember, there would be no explanations. The audience would see Barton,

would witness his actions and his changes of expression, would hear what was said and note the tone of his voice. From this observation would be gained a clear idea of the motives actuating the character. Concentrate upon making readers see and hear what takes place—and if matters pertaining to taste, smell, and feeling enter into the picture, present them also. Let these *sense evidences* tell the story. The reader does not care so much to know that something has happened, as to *see it happen*. Leave the explanations for less important scenes—the connecting material.

To the writer who would achieve a popular type of narration no better advice can be given than this: "Dramatize your scenes." And lest this advice be misinterpreted, let it be said that the best examples of purely dramatic narration are to be found in such magazines as the Atlantic Monthly, the Century, and Harper's. It is likely to be only the novice or semiexpert writer who flounders around in dreary passages of explanation and analysis of his characters' motives.

W. E. H.

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of THE STUDENT-WRITER, published
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Before me, a notary in and for the state and county aforesaid, personally appeared Willard E. Hawkins, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of The Student-Writer, Denver, Colo., and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management and circulation, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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